

# 34 Are Burned to Death When Giant Roma, U. S. Army Dirigible, Plunges 1,500 Feet

## Two Remarkable Trips in the Roma Described by R. U. Johnson

## Captain Mabry His Companion in Flight

## Ship Seemed as Safe as a Rock, So Steady and Sure Was Its Aerial Passage

By Robert Underwood Johnson

(Former United States Ambassador to Italy, former editor "Century Magazine," secretary American Academy of Arts and Sciences, who made two flights in the Roma immediately after she was purchased for the United States Government.)

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### MY FIRST TRIP IN THE ROMA

March 3, 1921.

My Roman diary of the 3d of March begins: "This has been a memorable day. Through the kind offices of Colonel Chaney, Assistant Military Attaché of my embassy and specialist in aviation, we have had the rare experience of a trip of an hour and a half over the city and then over Lake Albano in the big semi-rigid dirigible Roma, which has been bought by the United States government for \$194,000. It is awaiting the arrival of American experts sent to make a trial trip before it shall be taken to pieces for transport to Newport News, Va., where it is to be reassembled."

These prosaic words stand for one of the most poetic and thrilling experiences I have ever had.

Much to my regret, the ambassador did not go in the party, which included, besides Colonel and Mrs. Chaney, my son, Owen, and his wife and his daughter, Olivia; Mr. Reading Bertron, Commander Field, Assistant Naval Attaché; Commandant Reimbert, French aviation attaché, and Mme. Reimbert and a number of others, perhaps twenty in all.

### Italian Morning Favors Trip

It was a glorious morning, such as we had had for three weeks, with a bit of mist along the horizon—the delicate gray which haunts the Alban hills and sifts into Rome these crisp March mornings. We left the Grand Hotel at 8 o'clock in automobiles and in forty minutes arrived at the big hangar on the Campagna, to the southeast of the city. The Roma was already out, and a beautiful sight it was—as gay and light as a bubble, quite something out of fairyland—and we could hardly realize that with it we were soon to be companions of the air.

The ascent was to be at 9 o'clock, and the intervening time was occupied in looking at two other airships in the hangar—a small one of the "G" type (the smallest airship made, I believe) and the colossal German Zeppelin LZ-120, which was assigned to Italy after the war, and which had the unenviable reputation of having bombed London three times. I may speak of it in the past, for it was afterward irretrievably injured in the attempt to get it into the hangar. It still bore the iron cross painted under one side, but it had been renamed the Ansonia—I believe an ancient name for this part of Italy. It had four boats pendant, one in front, two amidships and one aft, each having a motor attached. To communicate between these one had to climb a ladder and walk through the interior, which struck me as a clumsy expedient. It was not quite so large as the Roma, but was of much the same shape.

### Six Engines Propel Roma

Proceeding to the Roma we found the men holding it by ropes attached to the sides above and forward and aft of the cabin, which is placed amidships. It is 420 feet long and its content is 1,100,000 cubic feet. Six engines (three sets) hang below the envelope, and these Ansonia-San Giorgio motors have nearly 3,000 horsepower. Wondering if there might be a Jonah among us, we mounted by a short ladder into the belly of this leviathan of the air to a first deck, about twenty-five feet long, open on both sides save for an iron taffrail that forms part of the structure; and then to the right by a few steps up to a cabin, having arm chairs and five windows on each side; but we soon went back to the more interesting first deck, where the pilot stood at the wheel on the starboard side.

After we were under way I followed an officer and my son up a long, narrow incline by a plank pathway to the very bow, holding on by ropes. Had I fallen over I should have tested the strength of the envelope, which is chiefly of rubberized cotton, though in certain parts considerable silk is used. The skeleton framework is of aluminum, and as one looks toward bow or stern the effect is of looking along a three-faced prism with the point down.

Throughout the trip the temperature was mild, and some of the cabin windows were open, although we were going at the rate of thirty miles an hour over the city and fifty over the Campagna. Our highest altitude was about 900 feet. The noise of the engines made one's speech painful to the ear. Indeed, it was so great that the coming of the Roma was announced from afar, and the people rushed to windows and streets to see again the never-failing wonder.

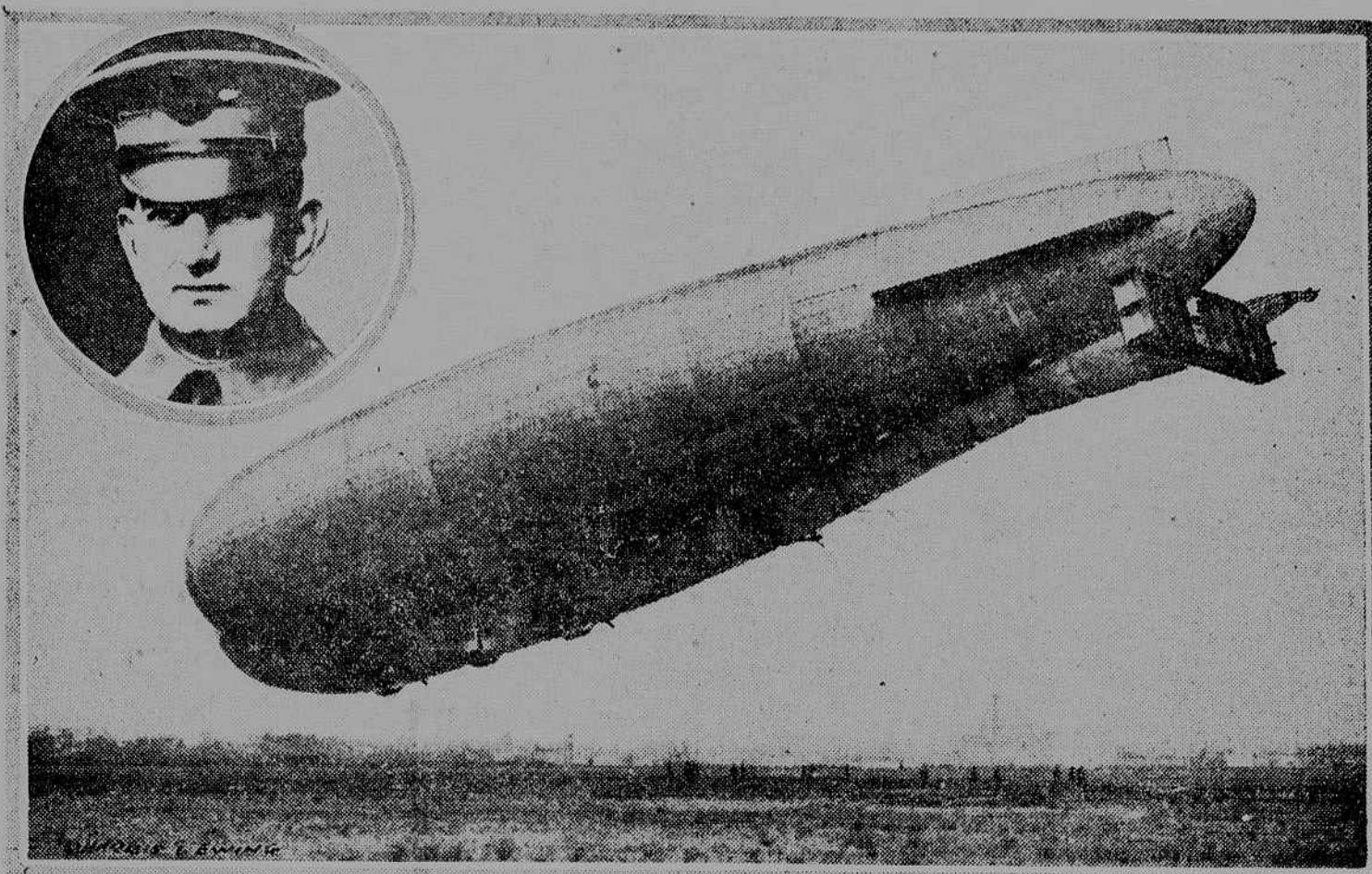
### Flight Causes No Sensations

I was astonished to find that I had no unusual sensations in rising—no dizziness, no qualms, no sense of shifting from side to side. There was, in fact, until just as we descended, nothing to indicate that we were not stationary, except the change of scene. The almost treeless Campagna, brown and green, was very beautiful and picturesque to look upon—long, straight roads, hedges, walls, railways, fissures of waterless streams, white dots of houses, big groups of sheep or cattle huddling or scampering at the noise of our approach, and chiefly the long, broken lines and arches of the ancient aqueducts. As we started for the city we saw to the left, setting off the emptiness of the Campagna, the massive round tomb of Cecilia Metella.

The approach to the city was thrilling. St. Peter's rose gray-white in the distance and the whole of the Eternal City lay before us in one comprehensive glance. Off to the north was Horace's Mount Soracte, the winter thermometer of Rome, standing out separately among the neighboring hills. We had the advantage of Caesar and his contemporaries of seeing their favorite city as they had never seen it. The walls and gates were well defined, and through the opera glass we could describe the details of many of the famous monuments—the most prominent being the Lateran, the pyramid of Cestius

(Continued on next page)

The Roma and Her Commander, Who Was Killed



The ill-fated dirigible is shown landing at Bolling Field after a recent six-hour flight. Captain Dale Mabry, in charge of the craft, was burned to death when it was destroyed by fire yesterday.

## Senators Agree On Reservation To 4-Power Pact

### Brandagee Amendment, Definitely Providing Against Use of Force, Receives Approval of Committee

### Suits Lodge and Harding Consent of Congress Also To Be Required for Any Action Under Covenant

From The Tribune's Washington Bureau.  
WASHINGTON, Feb. 21.—The Senate Foreign Relations Committee today practically decided to adopt a reservation to the four-power treaty, framed by Senator Brandagee, of Connecticut, which is intended to relieve the United States of any obligation to use force and to require the consent of Congress to any adjustment or understanding arrived at under the treaty.

While the reservation was not formally adopted, the developments in committee made it clear that it would be. Senator Lodge has advised Senator Brandagee that he will accept it, and members of the Foreign Relations Committee are advised that President Harding will not stand in the way of it. In the committee today Senator Kellogg, of Minnesota, was the only member openly to oppose it, although Senators New, McCumber and Williams are considered against it.

**Text of Proposed Reservation**  
Following is the Brandagee reservation: "The Senate advises and consents, subject to the following reservation, which is to be made a part of the instrument of ratification, to wit: "The United States understands that it assumes no obligation, either legal or moral, to maintain the rights in relation to the insular possessions or insular dominions of any of the other high contracting parties, and that the consent of the Congress of the United States shall be necessary to any adjustment or understanding under Article (Continued on page six)

## Marooned Family Saved By Food From Airplane

### Help Thwarted by Storm, Supplies Are Dropped Into Yard by Aerial Rescuer

RENO, Nev., Feb. 21.—Marooned from the rest of the world with no means of replenishing their food supply, a father, mother and two children living on a homestead twelve miles north of Reno were saved from possible starvation today by the air mail service, which sent a food laden airplane to the district. While the plane circled over the house three large sacks of food were dropped into the yard.

Heavy storms had made it impossible to reach the house, and neighboring homesteaders had attempted to aid them, but could not reach the place, even on horseback.

It was three weeks ago when the father, J. Welch, came to Reno and bought a small supply of food. He had planned to obtain more the following week. He was ill at the time.

Then the storm came and the air mail service was unable to aid. It took the plane just half an hour to complete the errand.

## List of Dead, Missing and Those Who Survived Airship Disaster

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21.—An official list of the survivors, dead and missing in the Roma disaster was received from Langley Field by the Army Air Service to-night. The addresses, however, in most cases were unavailable. The list follows:

- Identified Dead**  
First Lieutenant William E. Riley, of 526 East Eighty-sixth Street, New York.  
**Missing**  
Major John G. Thorneil.  
Major Walter W. Vautsmeier.  
Captain Dale Mabry.  
Captain George D. Watts.  
Captain Allen P. McFarland.  
Captain — Durschmidt.  
First Lieutenant J. R. Hall.  
First Lieutenant C. Burns.  
First Lieutenant Clifford E. Smythe.  
First Lieutenant Wallace C. Cummings.  
First Lieutenant Ambrose V. Clinton.  
First Lieutenant Harold Hine.  
Master Sergeant Roger B. McNally.  
Master Sergeant Murry.  
Master Sergeant Homer Gorby.  
Sergeant Lee M. Harris.  
Sergeant Lewis Hilliard.  
Sergeant Beal.  
Sergeant Thomas Yarborough.  
Sergeant William Ryan.  
Sergeant Virgil Huffman.  
Sergeant Schumacher.  
Sergeant Beale Holmes.  
Sergeant Heveron.  
**Survivors**  
Private Kingston.  
Private Thomas M. Blakeley.  
Private John Thompson.  
Private Marion Hill.  
Civilians (all from McCook Field, Dayton, Ohio).  
W. W. Stryker, engine expert.  
Robert Hanson, mechanic.  
William O'Laughlin, mechanic.  
Thomas Harriman, mechanic.  
C. W. Schulerberger, mechanic.

## Sinn Fein Assembly Split by De Valera's Cry for 'Freedom'

By Arthur S. Draper

From The Tribune's European Bureau.  
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DUBLIN, Feb. 21.—The national assembly of the Sinn Fein, after an all-day session, adjourned to-night badly divided over the Anglo-Irish treaty, but still hopeful of some compromise that will prevent wrecking the Sinn Fein movement. A vote for or against the pact, hoped for by 7 o'clock to-night, was put over until to-morrow with the expectation that some middle ground can be found between the extremist republicans, led by Eamon de Valera, and the Free Staters, headed by Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins.

At adjournment it was apparent that the Free Staters were on the defensive and De Valera, whose opening clarion note of freedom won the crowd, had the upper hand. Richard Mulcahy, Minister of Defense in the Free State cabinet and leader of the republican army, prevented a complete split by proposing a compromise which may postpone a general election in Ireland on the treaty.

Members of the Catholic clergy made a determined effort to reconcile the antagonistic views of the Free Staters and the republicans. Although there seems to be no possibility of this, Mulcahy's peace-making efforts may succeed in deferring the issue for a time and leaving the Sinn Fein party intact. De Valera was frankly in favor of a wide-open split, preferring two parties, for and against the treaty, rather than one party divided against itself. But Mulcahy's proposal was accepted. Under it the leaders of both sides were in closed session to-night to reach a compromise that will guarantee the future of a united Sinn Fein.

De Valera characterized to-day's meeting as "miniature Ireland." Three thousand delegates were super-crowded into a circular room at the Mansion House that is only 100 feet in diameter and has one single narrow balcony. With no heat, no ventilation and a majority of the delegates smoking pipes, the atmosphere became so unbearable that De Valera had to get up on his (Continued on page seven)

## Survivors Tell Of Plunge in Burning Craft

### Everything Ran Smoothly. Says Sergeant in Charge of Motors, Until the Elevation Lever Went Wrong

### Electric Wire Fatal Captain Mabry Commended by Men for Efforts in Trying to Save Roma

NORFOLK, Feb. 21.—Survivors of the Roma disaster were able to-night to give a fairly detailed story of their experience. Only three of the forty-five men who went up in the airship came down uninjured. Those who were hurt were, in many cases, too seriously injured to tell what had occurred, and others remembered only vivid incidents of the terrifying few minutes in which they faced almost certain death.

Sergeant J. N. Biedenbach, one of the eleven survivors, said the Roma was "alive" one minute and dead the next. "If I am still living and not crazy," he said, "we were only in a burning ship five minutes. I heard men scream about me. I was busy with the motors at the time. The motors worked perfectly. There was never a flying ship that had more right to live than the Roma did to-day."

"The weather was with us; the engines and motors worked perfectly and everything was running as smoothly as one could wish until the elevation lever went back on us. We were down then. We came down when the rudder hung up on us. We were then probably 1,200 feet up. We came down gradually. The steering gear got all right after we made the descent and we were trying to clear the wires and smokestacks at the army base where we caught fire."

**Electric Wire Destroyed Work**  
"If the elevation lever had worked properly, the Roma would have never caught fire, in my opinion. I did not know the ship was on fire until I felt a jolt. It was the electric wire that destroyed the ship and burned up so many men."

"Captain Mabry was the bravest man I ever saw. He stuck to the last. He did his best to save us and save the Roma."

Sergeant Virgil T. Peek, another survivor, said the Roma was behaving beautifully until she hit the ground. It was not until Lieutenant Burt shouted that the elevation lever would not work and some one said something about hitting a smokestack that we realized we were in danger.

"The Roma barely missed hitting a tall smokestack on one of the buildings at the army base. The men breathed a sigh of relief when that was over. Then when Lieutenant Burt was unable to make the elevation lever do its duty we shot past one building, then another. It appeared to us like there was nothing but buildings and poles in front of us. They passed us rapidly. It reminded me of looking out of a window of a train and seeing telegraph poles pass every second. Then there came a jolt. My clothing was on fire almost instantly. I did not know what had happened, but I trembled all over. I must have sustained a shock."

"Albert Flores, who was in the observers' pit, on top of the bag, said: 'I felt the ship tilt up from the back and started a smokestack. I tried to (Continued on next page)

When You Think of Writing Think of Whiting—Advt.

## 3 of 11 Survivors Unhurt; Many Are Killed in Leap From Flaming Craft

## Capt. Mabry, Pilot, Dies at His Post

## Crash With High Voltage Wire at Hampton Roads Causes Explosion; Rudder Fails

Special Dispatch to The Tribune

NORFOLK, Va., Feb. 21.—The second attempt of the United States to develop an airship fleet through purchases abroad ended disastrously at the Hampton Roads army base to-day, when the army semi-rigid dirigible Roma, after developing rudder trouble 1,500 feet on the air, crashed 200 feet in flames to the ground, exploded and caused the death of thirty-four of the forty-five passengers and members of the crew on board. The accident was the worst in the history of aircraft in the United States.

Three of the eleven survivors, by miracle or chance, were unhurt. A tarnished gold clasp clinging to a charred uniform served to identify one of the dead as Major John G. Thorneil, the Air Service officer, who supervised this 412-foot flying ship since the day she was acquired from the Italian government. The others of those unfortunate navigators of the air are mercifully posted at Langley Field as "missing" to soften the fact that they are but charred embers among the fused and blackened metal that was the articulated framework of this greatest of all semi-rigid airships.

After the airship which had a capacity of 1,200,000 cubic feet of hydrogen gas, was set on fire by the explosion the heat was so intense that firemen from three departments worked five hours before they could take out the charred bodies of the victims buried under the great framework.

### Army Officers Begin Investigation

The story of the last cruise of the Roma has been pieced together to-night by army investigators taking the accounts of ground observers, the broken sentences of terribly burned survivors, and the more lucid versions of the three men who were unhurt.

Mute testimony was added to the words of the living by fleshless hands that clutched the pilot wheel in a grip of death. They told something of the heroism of those flying men, of a soldierly devotion to duty that is ordinarily associated only with battlefields. They had been the hands of Captain Dale Mabry, chief pilot and commander of the Roma. He died at his post, and doing so created a tradition for captains of the air that parallels the ancient law of the sea.

The Roma became unmanageable at the height of 1,500 feet through some defect that developed in her elevating mechanism. The huge structure had been taken out on what was to have been a speed flight to test six Liberty motors of 400-horsepower each that had replaced the more delicate and less satisfactory Italian engines with which she was originally driven.

Back and forth over the flatlands about Hampton Roads the dirigible was guided by her expert crew for nearly an hour. Then, as the ship straightened out for a flight inland to Richmond, something went wrong. The first intimation the crew and passengers had was a shout from Lieutenant Burt, in charge of the elevator planes.

Major J. G. Reardon, one of the survivors, told about that. He said: "I heard Lieutenant Burt cry, 'She won't respond!' " "Captain Mabry, standing by his wheel, shouted to the lieutenant to elevate the ship. Burt put his whole weight on the elevation lever, but the Roma, her nose going lower and lower, continued to rush toward the ground. Then I heard Captain Mabry say, 'Good God, boys!' There was no fire until we struck a high voltage electric wire just above the ground. Then everything burst into flames."

### Dives to Earth Under Own Power

It was just a little before 2 o'clock in the afternoon when those of the ground at the army base at Hampton Roads heard the roaring of the six powerful Liberty motors of the Roma. Looking up, they were just in time to see the blunt nose of the silvery mass point sharply downward.

For a few moments the ship dove toward the earth under her own power. She was not falling. Then the motors were shut off and the speed of the descent slackened. The horrified watchers on the ground saw tiny, ant-like figures at the portholes in the triangular keel frantically heaving and ballast through the openings, but they worked in vain.

As the vessel came near the earth, her pilots still striving frantically to control her, the airship struck two high tension wires carrying 2,500 volts. The next instant the nose of the big vessel hit the ground and rolled over. There followed a terrific explosion and then the whole airship was on fire.

When the Roma burst into flames many of those on board leaped for their lives. Their bodies fell on a pile of pig iron, and in less time than it takes to tell the burning airship fell almost on the same spot. Ten men who had made the desperate leap for life, if they were not already dead when their bodies struck the pile of iron, were burned to death under the airship.

There was just one man who leaped and landed on soft ground. He escaped almost unhurt, excepting for a few burns on his face and hands. He is Lieutenant Byron T. Burt. He jumped from the Roma when she was about thirty feet in the air and landed in the mud.

### Ten Escape After Hitting Earth

Ten other men were saved from death by being able to leave the ship quickly after she struck the earth. Captain Walter J. Reed, who stood by the ship to the last, came out of the burning mass of steel and wood and rags with just a few scars on his ear and hand. He says he does not know why he is alive. Of all the line officers on the Roma only two escaped death—Captain Reed and Lieutenant Burt. Both were listed as pilots on the Roma.

In the hands of two dead men dragged from the wreck were two extinguishers. This bears out the theory that the ship must have been on fire when she was 200 feet in the air, and the men had grabbed the extinguishers to help extinguish the blaze, but Captain Reed and Lieut-